

Identity seeking

Branding and other acts of definition



The freewheelin'
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We have to ask
more of life than
just brands

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Think about it: there must be higher love.

Steve Winwood

*I left formal education with few facts imprinted
in my brain, but with Adidas stamped on my
backside. Those were the days.*

Kevin Gould

*How did a practice as vile as branding become
so valued, indeed the very mark of value?*

Christopher Benfey

Pain is weakness leaving the body.

T-shirt slogan

*Actually, the most important thing you need ...
is to have big chunks of time during the day
when all you're doing is thinking.*

Barack Obama

One of the most intriguing things about life is how people (and organisations, for that matter) seek identity: something that defines them, differentiates them from others, or, perhaps, includes them in some amorphous group. From the outside, judgements might be made (sometimes not) about what it all means—or, at least, what it is supposed to mean.

Branding has been around for quite a while as a marketing approach, more recently as a social application. One doesn't follow a football club any more, for instance, but a

brand, with the attendant merchandising and promotion. People aren't encouraged to play or to attend the game so much as participate in brand recognition and buy authorised branded products of one sort or another. The relevant association or league doesn't promote or develop the game so much as 'grow' the brand.

One might wonder how the people who actually like the game see all this. Maybe they just ignore it, like so much else, or embrace it as customer or consumer, as they're supposed to.

Sometimes a brand takes over an object or process. Australian Football is now simply AFL, for instance, a takeover of reasonable proportions, as it implies that a game can be owned by a particular organisation.

Recently, players at the Collingwood club were suspended for the season because of inappropriate personal behaviour that was seen to damage the club's 'brand'. An implication here is that a brand has moral and ethical requirements, like being a role model, as defined.

Brands are not benign, although some can be devoid of content other than a consumer context. At Changi Airport in Singapore I recently observed a security officer querying a young woman about the cosmetic liquids she was taking on board her flight. Shocked, annoyed, and apparently unaware of the restrictions now applying to boarding with liquids in general, she identified a bottle as containing 'Pantene' rather than 'shampoo'. She appeared to consider these terms interchangeable and self-evident. This wasn't the perspective of the security officer, who was perhaps showing a lack of brand awareness. More likely, he was asking whether the label in the bottle correctly described the contents.

The MBTI is a brand. Many think that it's identical with Jung's typology, a significant category mistake which would probably disturb Isabel Myers, but a situation that underlines marketing success, as well as a copyright history stretching back 65 years.

Some years ago, a person involved in the development of the current MBTI logo proudly displayed it to me. I was somewhat befuddled by the level of importance attached to this achievement, as I thought people would be trained in and purchase the MBTI irrespective of symbols or colour schemes.

A recent distributor's price list, however, clarified the situation: all the products had similar logo designs, indicating a company theme. Whether people use these to identify and use the CPP Inc suite of products is beyond my knowledge, or comprehension for that matter. It looks nice, anyway.

Type codes could be considered brands as well, and even specific archetypes are now associated with various functions—but there's more to an INTP, or ENFJ for that matter, than a few labels and titles, much of it quite open-ended.

Churches and countries are also sometimes described as brands: 'Brand Britain', for instance, in an article about that nation's future. A corollary, being a customer of the Pope, or an Australian consumer, rather than citizen, may sound all too strange, for the moment at any rate, but some people think this way.

If brands symbolise anything it might be emptiness, or indifference to knowledge, or uncovered facts. A new biography of Franz Kafka identifies him as a wealthy man of the world, rather than having a life of angst and self-rejection (Walton 2008).

Travel writer Kevin Gould (2008) thinks that ancient kings were great at branding themselves. Visiting Mardin in eastern Turkey, a place of stone carvings of 'gods, kings, the rich and virtuous', as well as a place of the Pepsi logo, leads him to consider whether brands might be the new gods: a more than faintly terrifying prospect, unless you worship Pepsi (or Coca-Cola, an alternative deity) and provide the expected obeisance and offerings.

Having your own brand language has its difficulties as well. An actor in the recent BBC series *The Tudors* (controversial for its general lack of attention to historical facts, but a ripping yarn nonetheless), saw Henry VIII as a 'rock star', a brand familiar and comprehensible to him, but in meaning or intent incomprehensible to the king's contemporaries, who expected him to behave in particular ways. (Lipscomb 2008). Anna Keay describes in detail the requirements of Charles II, even in exile, to display his royalty and status (2008).

Trying to apply contemporary labels to a past where there were different priorities and perspectives leads to incongruities, like Mel Gibson playing a fictive William Wallace. Richard Taylor advises us how to 'read' a church with that sort of thing in mind: to help us see what medieval and early modern people saw, for instance, something closed to us otherwise (2004).

Twenty years ago Francis Fukuyama made his name by producing a book proclaiming the 'end of history', a proposition he has rethought recently. One wonders why anyone took him seriously, but maybe it's a useful proposition to those who don't understand history and think democracy is just something you can transplant anywhere, unable to see that the interests of Tsarist, Soviet and post-Soviet Russia wouldn't vary all that much. It's the same place, after all.

The act of being a TV expert also has its moments. Recently I watched and listened as an identified expert on the economy, if not the market, described the USA credit crisis as just something that happens from time to time, with an appropriate shrug. He followed up this line of thought with an improbable anecdote (impossible, really) about Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway and their housing loan in Stratford-upon-Avon.

None of this prompted the interviewer to challenge, let alone comment upon, what had been said. Perhaps it was because he was an economic expert, and so could be paradoxically content-free in his observations. Perhaps the interviewer didn't know enough to challenge his historical allusion.



Brands might be the new gods

He was professional in his vacuousness, I suppose—professionalism has a number of faces, not all dressed in competence or perspicacity. I wondered, though, why he wasn't called to account for his views. This sort of thing happens all too regularly in media these days. It's one of the reasons why opinion quickly becomes fact.

A pamphlet issued by Birmingham council in England to foster 'civic pride' included a skyline photo of Birmingham, Alabama, something quite different—although the council didn't see it as a problem (Alleyne 2008).

Being a customer or supporting a brand has its limits when the market or an organisation decides it doesn't want to continue to provide a service of social importance.

The citizens of Repton, a small town in Vermont, recently abruptly lost their postal service. After a while they received letters from the US Postal Service apologising for shutting down the post office without giving them proper notice: an act which, depending on your perspective, either missed the point, or made it (McKibben and Halpern 2008). More prosaically, the residents of Booze in Yorkshire were informed by the Royal Mail that deliveries would cease to their hamlet because the road is too narrow and the local postman has a bad back (*Khaleej Times* 2008).

Danae, a character in the intriguing newspaper cartoon series *Non Sequitur*, recently offered the opinion that the secret of success as a TV pundit is to 'just say "studies have shown" first, then all of your talking points go unquestioned, no matter how stupid they are'. Critical thinking is 'for losers' on that basis (Wiley 2008). Brand loyalty depends on the unconscious.

Economic commentator Paul Krugman, unfazed by such a judgement, recently (2008) wrote about 'know-nothingism'—'the insistence that there are simple, brute-force, instant-gratification answers to every problem, and that there's something effeminate and weak about someone who thinks otherwise', or 'real men don't think things through'. A US marine's T-shirt spied by Garrison Keillor (2008), stating 'Pain is weakness leaving the body', was perhaps a similar line of thought.

Thinking things through may not be a default position for many people at all, real men or otherwise. Robert Colville recently reported that US presidential candidate Barack Obama may be 'too thin to win', one of a number of basic reactions (emotional or unconscious, presumably) that serve many, rather than an appreciation of policies or arguments (2008).

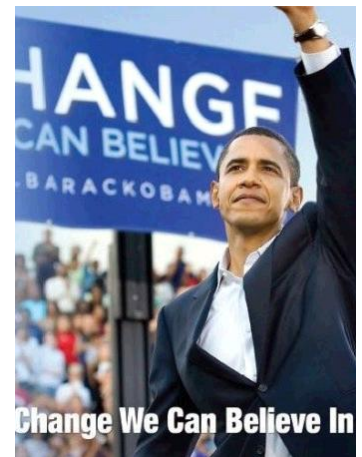
Social dilettante Paris Hilton, following up on political comparisons made between her and Barack Obama, recently released a video saying that she was 'ready to lead', showing, amongst other things, an admirable sense of humour. Her ability to easily present material written for her also invited positive comparisons with the incumbent president (Hornby 2008).

If you think entirely in terms of brands, the world of politics becomes extremely convoluted and the search for a leader (whatever that is) leads to hope for an avatar with no discernible faults or failures—someone inhuman, actually.

Reviewing Steven Heller's *Iron Fists: Branding the 20th Century Totalitarian State*, Christopher Benfey wonders how 'a practice as vile as branding' became 'so valued, indeed the very mark of value' (2008). The book deals with Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini, Hitler and Mao, the latter three considering themselves artists, however proficient.

Brand advertising may not be as brutal as Nazi branding, for instance, but 'the design and marketing methods are fundamentally similar'. So, Obama's 'Change we can believe in', a giveaway of his type preferences (NF, probably INFP) is an introduction to his brand. John McCain has his 'Straight Talk Express' taking him everywhere.

Qantas has had its public moments recently regarding the maintenance of its aircraft, the object of cost-cutting over several years. The diffidence of some of its staff emerges from time to time, including in personal experience. A recent passenger, Andrew Chia, reported his experience of 'indifferent, insincere' service: his emailed feedback received an automated reply, but no response. When he enquired about the status of his email 30 days later, he again received the same automated reply.



A giveaway of his type preferences

Defending or maintaining a brand sometimes requires indifference to other, inconvenient, experiences.

This sort of approach may not be good for Qantas' image, but it mightn't make any real difference. The hard-sell 'what you see is what you get' approach of American Airlines now includes charging customers for the use of their own frequent-flier points (Quinn 2008), and indications are that this sort of thing will become regular across airline companies. One wonders how far brand loyalty will stretch.

But, in the end, like Steve Winwood, we have to ask more of life than just brands. Conscious perception and judgement of whatever sort is a good alternative. ❖

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